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Instances of Interactions and Conflicts in the North Sea in Medieval Times, with an Emphasis on Frisia

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Abstract

In the Early Middle Ages, the North Sea region – particularly the Frisian territory – served as the arena for deep and frequent contacts among the Germanic tribes settled on the coastal regions. This contribution aims to analyse samples of sources ranging from literary texts to runic inscriptions, which demonstrate that the nature of such interactions was neither distinctly peaceful nor warlike, but was rather marked by a degree of ambiguity and complexity.

Keywords: Frisia, Ingvaeonic, Interrelations, North Sea, Vikings

1. Frisia as an Intermediary Region between the Continent and the Scandinavian World

Between the 4th and the 6th century – that is in the period of the Barbarian Invasions – as well as during the so-called Viking Age (ca. 793-1066), the geographical areas around the Channel, encompassing Frisia, northern Germany and Early English England, become the scene of close and strong contacts among the Germanic peoples settled on the coastal lands. Such contacts, which were quite heterogeneous and diversified, led to the rise of the so-called “North Sea Culture” (van Regteren Altena and Heidinga 1977, 48; Heidinga 1997, 18; Penz 2000; IJssennagger 2010, 11; Hines and IJssennagger 2017), as attested to by a great deal of archaeological remains, linguistic evidence, and literary texts.

The survey of a selection of sources of various typology will confirm the complex and multifaceted contact situation among the different Germanic civilizations in this part of Northern Europe, which is also traceable at various levels and in diverse historical moments.

1.1 Some Literary Evidence

The well-known Old English *Finnsburh Fragment* and the digression on the same subject included in the epic *Beowulf* (ll. 1068-1158) narrate of a feud between Frisians and Danes in the Migration Period (maybe in the 5th or 6th century). Another case of warfare on the coasts of the North Sea is the ill-fated raid against the Frankish kingdom led by Hygelac (Chochilaicus), King of the Geats, also echoed in *Beowulf* (ll. 1202-1214a, 2354b-2359a, 2913-2921) – where the episode is placed in Frisia – and inspired by a historical event that happened in 516, reported by Gregory of Tours in his *Decem Libri Historiarum* (III.3).¹

Further evidence of the maritime vocation and the related penchant for cross-sea connections of the populations settled around the Channel in medieval times is provided by the interpolation in the Old English *Orosius* (ch. 20) recounting a voyage made in northern Europe by Wulfstan, perhaps a Jutlander, or an Englishman, or even a Frisian (Bately 1980, lxi). Wulfstan's report describes a route starting from Hedeby, sailing in the Baltic Sea towards the East. It is essentially the first part of the commercial route of the Vikings to reach Byzantium, which passed first through the sea, then along the river and finally along the land.

From the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* we know that in 897 King Alfred had set up a fleet to defend the country from attacks of the Danes and that, among the men hired to be the crew of the ships, numerous Frisians had also been chosen, alongside Anglo-Saxon sailors: “Ðær wearð ofslægen Lucumon cynges gerefa 7 Wulfheard Friesa 7 Æbbe Friesa 7 Æðelhere Friesa 7 Æðelferð cynges geneat, 7 ealra monna fresiscra 7 Englisca .lxii. 7 þara deniscena .cxx.” (Bately 1986, 60-61).²

1.2 The Frankish-Anglo-Saxon Missionary Activity

In the context of this thick web of interactions and cultural exchanges among North Sea peoples, an important role is played by the Anglo-Saxon monks, whose missionary activity was instrumental in the expansion of Christianity in the Frankish Empire during the 8th century (Wood 2001, 10-12). The obstinate resistance of the Frisian people to the imposition of the Christian faith is known and, in some ways, even legendary. Their proud attachment to the ancient pagan cults, that certainly had a political implication, led in 754 to the martyrdom of Boniface, the “Apostle of the Germans”. A significant setback in the conversion of Friesland is represented by the almost mythical story of the failed baptism of the Frisian king Redbad. In the *Life of Saint Wulfram* (ch. 9), it is told how the king, before immersing himself in the baptismal font, would have asked if he had ever met his ancestors in heaven. To the bishop's negative response, Redbad retracted his foot from the font, stating that he would have preferred to spend eternity in the pains of hell together with his ancestors, rather than in the company of his enemies, especially the Franks (Levison 1910, 668). Despite the several failures of the evangelizing action carried out by the Anglo-Saxon missionaries, the Frisians eventually became Christian, at least on paper:

¹ The episode is also attested by the anonymous chronicle *Gesta Regum Francorum* (ch. 19), also known as *Liber historiae Francorum* (ca. 727) and by the eighth-century *Liber Monstrorum* (I.2), where Hygelac is depicted as a prodigious creature because of his supposed gigantic stature.

² Trans. by Swanton 1998, 91: “There were killed Lucumon, the king's reeve, and Wulfheard the Frisian, and Æbbe the Frisian, and Æthelhere the Frisian, and Æthelfrith the king's geneat, and of all men, Frisian and English, 62, and 120 of the Danish”.

Christianization in Frisia was a slow process of top-down conversion, and was particularly linked to the expansion of Carolingian power. Similarly, in neighbouring Saxony, conversion and Frankish expansion went hand in hand [...] From a Frankish perspective, being Christian – as opposed to heathen, like the Vikings – was one of the most important criteria for being regarded as part of the Frankish community. [...] In this view, the inclusion of Frisia in the Carolingian realm is seen as a positive change from heathen times, with connections to the north and as a final incorporation of Frisia into a Continental, Christian world (Ijssennagger 2013, 75-76).

2. Archaeological Sources

The development of close connections all around the North Sea area is also proven by a number of archaeological finds, particularly those discovered in the *terps* (also known as *wierden* in Groningen), that is artificial dwelling mounds found in the marshy areas along the coasts of the provinces of Friesland and Groningen, that had been erected to provide safe ground in case of sea or river flooding, storm surges and high tides. The *terps* have a height ranging from two to five meters and can extend over a very large surface. Their soil is made up of marine clay covered by the humus of salt-resistant vegetation and mixed with manure and waste. The technique of raising *terps*, which dates back to ca. 200 AD, lasted until the 11th century, when the progress of water engineering permitted the building of the first dykes. The humidity that characterises the soil of the *terps* has favoured the preservation of many material objects, which elsewhere, under different geomorphic conditions, would have undergone a faster process of decay.

Archaeological evidence reveals that from the 7th to the 10th century peoples of the North Sea were bound together in a close network of relations of various kinds: trade, economic, political. The pivot of such network was undoubtedly Frisia,

[...] whose location as the cross roads between the North Sea and the heart of the Frankish Empire allowed Frisian, Frankish, and Scandinavian merchants to carry goods back and forth across the North Sea while at the same time facilitating the movement of ideas and cultural exchange [...] The steady growth of economic activity in the North Sea facilitated contact and communication between Francia and Scandinavia well before the first major Viking attacks on the Frankish empire in the 830s. (Melleno 2014, 65)

The coastal regions of Friesland were traversed by a dense system of rivers and watercourses, intensely exploited for the transport of merchandise and the subsequent growth of commerce. Therefore, the environmental conditions of Friesland have in fact encouraged and stimulated the development of its attitude towards maritime and trade activities (rather than agriculture) (Ijssennagger-van der Pluijm 2021). Actually, Frisian traders sailed along the North Sea and Baltic coasts between the 8th and 9th centuries, and the hub of their commercial activity was made up of emporia like Dorestad, Walichrum and Tiel (Knol and Ijssennagger 2017, 17-19).

Archaeological excavations as well as coin finds confirm that a wide range of northern items were traded in the Continent: whale bones, walrus tusks, reindeer antlers, soapstone, whetstones, and the Baltic amber. On the other way around, there is also a wealth of evidence of Frankish imports towards Scandinavia, especially luxury goods produced in France, such as ceramics, glassware, swords, combs and metal objects. All these finds (many of them discovered in burial sites) are indicative of the rising levels of contact among the North Sea populations before the ninth century. Precious objects such as the famous brooch from Wijnaldum (Schoneveld and Zijlstra 1999) (fig. 1) or the pyramid-shaped pommel of a sword from Ezinge (fig. 2), dating both to the 7th century, seem to be related to quite similar finds unearthed in England and Scandinavia, revealing the existence and persistence of a “North Sea cultural World” (Ijssennagger 2013, 70).



Fig. 1 – The Wijnaldum brooch, ca. 625, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden – Collection Province of Fryslân | photography: Erik and Petra Hesmerg photography



Fig. 2 – The pyramidal sword stud from Ezinge. Collection Groninger Museum: Photo Marten de Leeuw

2.1 Runic Finds

Of particular interest to this research are some runic artefacts of the Frisian tradition, which can help to shed light on the interrelations between Frisians and their North Sea neighbours. The size of the Frisian runic corpus is quite small: it consists of about twenty inscriptions (some of which are very short, even made up of a single word), all drawn on portable objects of various kinds (coins, combs, tablets, weapons) and different materials (metal, bone, ivory, yew wood). The dating proposed for the Frisian runic corpus ranges from the 5th to the 9th centuries approximately.

A number of inscriptions show links with Scandinavian runic features, suggesting that around the 9th century the Frisian runic system may have been affected by a significant influence of the Norse tradition, perhaps as a consequence of the Viking presence in the Frisian territory (Looijenga 2003, 328). The piece of antler Wijnaldum A (fig. 3), of uncertain date and preserved in the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, looks like a small three-sided horn. On two sides the object is engraved, on one side with ornamental signs such as crosses, squares and triangles; the other side exhibits a quite cryptic runic inscription, for which the transliteration “z ng zz uu ng i zz ng” has been proposed, to be interpreted, reading from right to left, as *(I) ng(u)z*, *Inguz*, *(I)ng(u)z*, maybe a triple invocation of the eponymous god of the *Ingaevones* (Sipma 1969, 69-70). Beyond the exegetical difficulties of the runic sequence, the object is of some interest because it presents significant analogies with the Lindholm amulet, coming from the region of Skåne (Sweden) (fig. 4). Not only the shape of the Wijnaldum A bone fragment is close to that of the Swedish amulet, but also the anomalous form of some runic signs, which have been traced with double lines.



Fig. 3 – The Wijnaldum A antler horn, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden –
Collection Koninklijk Fries

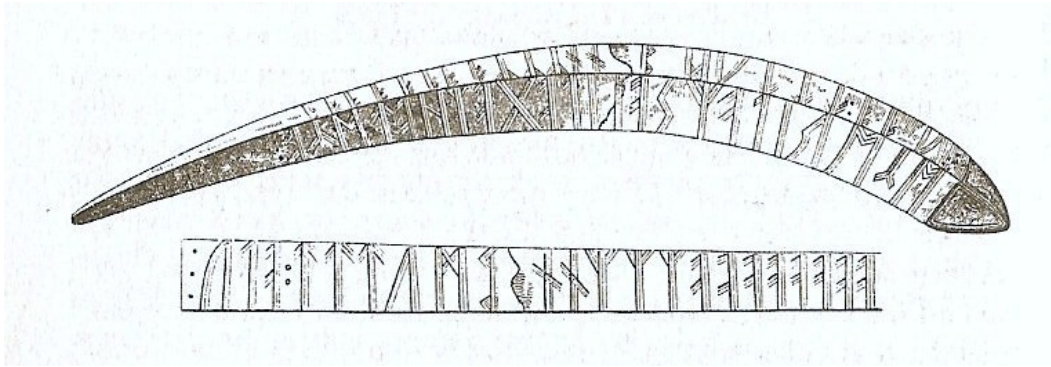


Fig. 4 – The Lindholm amulet, as drawn by Stephens in 1884
 <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amuleto_di_Lindholm#/media/File:Lindholm_amulet.jpg> (Public domain)

The use of multiple-lines runes, found in several Scandinavian finds, such as the above-mentioned Lindholm amulet, or also the Kragehul's spearshaft (Funen) (fig. 5), characterises another Frisian runic find, the Britsum yew-wooden stick (Fries Museum in Leeuwarden) (fig. 6).

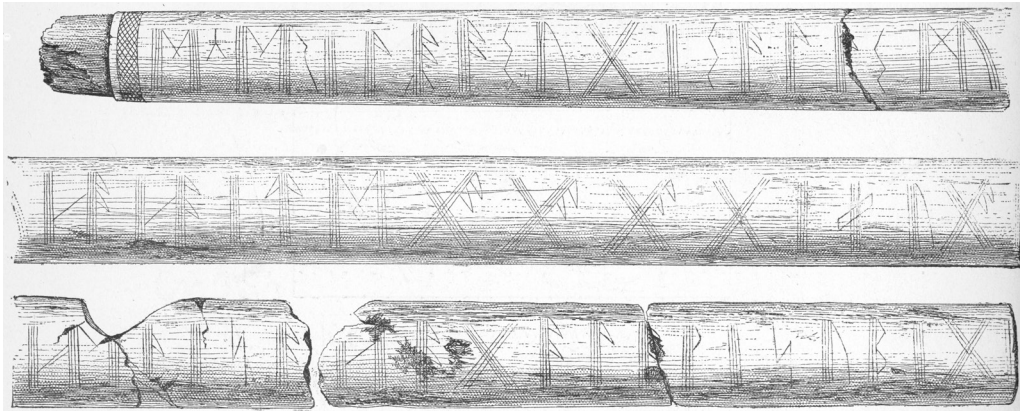


Fig. 5 – The Kragehul inscription, Copenhagen, National Museum (Public domain)



Fig. 6 – Britsum yew-wooden stick, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden – Collection Koninklijk Fries Genootschap

Most of the runes visible on the Britsum stick are carved in three, four, five lines. Moreover, one of the runes has the form of the Scandinavian *k* (ᚵ) or else the so-called English “bookhand” *s*, although here it should be read as a vowel. There is still great uncertainty about the interpretation of the runic sequence reported on the Britsum stick: Bugge reads “Trage immer diese Eibe, darin liegt Tugend” (1908, 176-77); Arntz and Zeiss “Trag immer diese Eibe! Darin ist Kraft enthalten” (1939, 167); Buma “Trage immer dieses Eibenholz im Heergefolge” (1951, 306-07).³ Be that as it may, most scholars agree in considering the text of the Britsum inscription as an injunction always to carry this piece of yew, that possibly represents a kind of amulet.

Scandinavian influences can also be traced in the Westeremden B yew-wooden stick (fig. 7), preserved at the Groninger Museum, and possibly dating back to the 8th century. The long runic legend that reads here contains some Anglo-Frisian characters, some runes with unusual shapes or uncertain values, and some runes of the younger 16-letter Danish *fupark*, such as ᚷ *kaun* (“ulcer”) and ᚠ *ár* (“plenty”).



Fig. 7 – Westeremden B yew-wooden stick, Collection Groninger Museum: Photo Marten de Leeuw

Looijenga (2003, 312-14) proposes the reading “op hæmu jibada æmluþ : iwi ok up duna (a)le wimœd æh þusa”.⁴ This runic find, whose inscription, due to its obscurity, has been defined as “formidable” by Page (2001, 528), is probably the product of cultural hybridization, as asserted by Kaiser: “[the] amalgamation of rune variants may point to a learned, possibly ecclesiastical background of the carver/s, perhaps in the context of the Anglo-Saxon missions of the 7th-8th centuries” (2021, 352).

The gold bracteate of Hitsum (fig. 8), datable between the 5th and 6th centuries approximately, and preserved at the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, is usually considered an object imported from Scandinavia. It bears a runic sequence that can be read as *fozo groba* (see Looijenga 2003, 208).

³ For further proposals of transliteration and interpretation of the Britsum runic inscription, see Looijenga 2003, 310-11.

⁴ Trans. by Looijenga 2003, 312-14: “at the homestead stays good fortune; may it also grow near the yew on the terp; Wimœd owns this”.



Fig. 8 – Hitsum bracteate, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden – Collection Koninklijk Fries Genootschap

Fōzō might be a North Gmc female personal name (\bar{o} -stem), or else it could allude to the tribal name of the Fosii. The form *groba* could be Old Saxon or Old Frisian and may be compared with ON *gróf* and OHG *gruoba* “groove, furrow”, possibly meaning “belonging to a grave”. According to Seebold (1996, 196), the Hitsum bracteate might be connected with a funeral rite.

The Frisian runic *corpus* may also include a runic object discovered and preserved in England, but which, on the basis of linguistic reasons, can be considered of Frisian origin. It is the knucklebone of a horse found in a medieval waste-pit in Hamwih, the early settlement site of Southampton, and now in the possession of the God’s House Tower Museum (Looijenga 2003, 324).

Dated between 650 and 1025, it bears a runic sequence transliterated as *kata*, maybe a personal name or nickname. The form *kata* “knucklebone”, linked to Dutch *koot*, derives from Gmc **kautōn*, and exhibits $\bar{a} < \text{Gmc } *au$, a typical Frisian linguistic feature (Hofmann 1976). It is known that the port of Hamwih was the hub of Early English society and was certainly the destination of many Frisians who carried out their trade there. Page, with reference to the inscribed bone from Hamwih, affirms:

It could relate to the Kentish-Isle of Wight sphere of influence, but *Hamwih* was a major port and the inscription could be the work of a traveller, perhaps even a Frisian, as is suggested faintly by one of its rune forms. (1999, 30)

The descriptions of the rune funds above demonstrate that there may have been some specific runic links relating the Frisian, Danish and English traditions, along and across the North-Sea coast. Perhaps these parallels among the Scandinavian and Anglo-Frisian runic *corpora* should be understood in the context of commercial exchanges that had the cities of Haithabu and Ribe in Denmark, Birka in Sweden, Hamwih in England, and Dorestad in Frisia as their main trading posts.

3. Relations among Frisians, Franks and Vikings

During the whole Middle Ages – as has been highlighted – Frisia was actually a sort of “border zone” between Viking Scandinavia and the Frankish empire (Lund 2006). Moreover, since Frisia has always maintained close ties to the Anglo-Saxon and pre-Viking Scandinavian communities, it also played a role of cultural intermediary between the Christian peoples of

the Continent and the pagan Northmen (Knol and Ijssennagger 2017, 17). In other words, Frisia was a strategic area in the context of the North Sea region, being connected from one side to the northern reaches of Scandinavia and from the other side to the Frankish heartlands of Austrasia and Neustria (Melleno 2014, 67).

If the whole evidence is considered, diverse forms of contacts and behaviours can be observed in the communication among the populations. As a matter of fact, the various written sources of the Frisian, Frankish, Scandinavian and British traditions report not only Viking incursions on Frisian territory, but also the granting of Danish feudal benefices in Frisia (Sawyer 1982; Page 1995; Jesch 2004; Ijssennagger 2010; Ijssennagger 2013). The archaeological record testifies to an intense commercial activity and gift-exchange between Frisia and Scandinavia, as well as to the establishment of Danish settlements all through the Viking Age (Giliberto 2017a, 127-29; 2017b, 69). On the other hand, the Frankish sources insisted on the violence of the Viking attacks, whereas the “world of trade is almost entirely absent from the minds of annalists and chroniclers” (Melleno 2014, 66).

3.1 *Viking Attacks*

The first Viking incursions against Friesland took place during Carolingian times. If we are to trust contemporary chronicles, in 810 the Danish king Godfred ravaged the islands of the Frisian coast with a fleet of 200 ships,⁵ defeating the Frankish defence and imposing on the surviving Frisians a tribute of a hundred pounds of silver. The event must be placed in the context of the rivalry between Danes and Franks, who for a number of years before 810 and up to the 10th century competed for dominion over Friesland.

In the years 834-39 Dorestad became the favourite object of Viking predation; after the death of the Frankish emperor Louis the Pious in 840, Danish raids on the Continent increased in intensity and frequency. As mentioned above, the incursions of the Vikings into Frisian land are mainly documented in the Frankish annals, in particular in the *Annales Regni Francorum*, *Annales Bertiniani*, *Annales Fuldenses* and *Annales Xantenses*. This is not surprising when one considers that the Frankish annals were strongly marked on a political and military level, and that they expressed the point of view of the Carolingian sovereigns, who saw in the Vikings a threat to be fought (Ijssennagger 2010, 24-28, 36-37). Moreover, there are also religious implications, as the Frankish annalists emphasised the destruction and suffering inflicted by the heathen invaders, describing the Viking attacks from the perspective of the victim, the Christian Frankish people.

During the second half of the 9th century and up to the early 10th century, the Frisians not only endured recurring Danish assaults, but were every now and then subjected to Danish rule, having to pay tribute to Danish feudal-tenants. Allusions to a Danish rule in Frisia (albeit a temporary one) are scattered in a number of historical sources, from Einhard's *Vita Karoli* (chapter 14) to Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* and later Frisian texts related to the legendary “Frisian Freedom”, such as the fifteenth-century *Freske Riim* (Giliberto 2017b, 68).

Information on Frisians as well as on Viking activity in the North Sea context are also to be found in Scandinavian or Insular literary sources, such as the *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, describing how Egill and his comrade Arinbjörn went raiding in Saxony and Frisia (Knol and Ijssennagger 2017, 18).

⁵ *Annales Regni Francorum*, a. 810 (Pertz 1895, 131). Maybe this figure has been overstated by the chronicler “to enforce the dramatic of the story, and in many cases the different Frankish sources provide different numbers” (Ijssennagger 2010, 38).

The last minor attacks are chronicled up to 1014. Afterwards, the Danish king Knut the Great united England, Norway and Denmark under his crown and the great waves of Viking raids in Friesland came to an end.

3.2 Cooperation between Frisians and Vikings

However, the historical context in which the Frisian-Scandinavian relations developed is much more complex and dynamic. The conflicts between these peoples gradually overlap and intersect with more cooperative types of interaction, attested by joint trading and raiding activities. In light of these circumstances, the “borders” between Frisians and Scandinavians in the Viking Age do not always appear clearly and sharply outlined.

A noteworthy record attesting to Frisian-Scandinavian contacts is a silver neck ring discovered in 1905 in the island of Senja, now preserved in the Tromsø Museum in northern Norway, and dated to c. 1025 (Jesch 1997, 10). The object – which is part of a hoard including neck rings and cruciform pendants (Graham-Campbell 1980, 87) – bears an interesting runic inscription, which is commonly transliterated as “furu- trikia frislat a uit auk uiks fotum uir skiftum” (Samplonius 1998, 91).⁶ The legend should be read as old Norse: “Fóru[m] drengja Fríslands á vit, ok vígs fótum vér skiptum”, that can be interpreted as half a poetic stanza composed in the alliterative metre *fornyrðislag* (Ijssennagger 2010, 54).⁷ The spoils of battle should be the loot snatched from the Frisian “boys”, the adversaries, whoever they are. Such reading – if correct – seems to fit in the framework of Viking incursions into Frisia, and, in this sense, the inscription of Senja could be seen as one of the sources documenting this phenomenon outside the Frankish annals.

Nonetheless, according to an alternative interpretation proposed by Jesch, the inscription could be read differently: “We visited our trading-partners in Frisia and bought (or ‘sold’ or ‘exchanged’) war-gear” (1997, 10), which opens the possibility to see in the runic fund of Senja a reference to commercial activities between Vikings and Frisians.⁸

According to another intriguing interpretation suggested by Samplonius, the inscription should be translated as “We visited the lads/warriors of Frisia and together we split the war-booty” (1998, 98), a reading that seems rather to allude to Frisian-Scandinavian joint raids, namely to a form of cooperation in the sphere of piracy activities and not in commercial ones.⁹

At any rate, even though the exact reading of the runic text on the Senja neck-ring is still a matter of debate, the only certain fact is that it suggests the existence of contact and cooperation between Frisians and Scandinavians in the Viking Age (Ijssennagger 2010, 4). The reading of this inscription is in line with a number of Continental and insular sources that provide evidence that Frisian warriors joined in Viking attacks, whereas others instead were led into slavery in Scandinavia. The following remarkable passage is taken from one of the

⁶ The inscription is registered in the *Sammordisk runtextdatabas* with no. 540, see: <<https://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm/>> (10/2023).

⁷ Unless otherwise stated all translations are mine. Trans.: We paid a visit to the fellas of Frisia, and we it was who split the spoils of battle.

⁸ In support of this hypothesis, Jesch (2001, 80) makes a comparison with two Swedish runic inscriptions (*Sammordisk runtextdatabas*, no. U 379 and no. U 391), which contain a reference to “Frisian corporations”, and which indicate (commercial) contacts between Friesland and Scandinavia in the late Viking Age.

⁹ A number of scholars have expressed the belief that this runic text refers to a real historical event. According to Olsen this was the early eleventh-century raid of Óláfr Haraldsson, purportedly to the Frisian coast of Kennemerlan, as reported by Sighvatr Þórðarson in his *Vikingarvísur* (1960, 127-40).

most important Old Frisian law text, the *Twentieth Landlaw* from the second half of the 11th century,¹⁰ and attests to a quite peculiar practice in the context of the Frisian-Scandinavian relations during the Viking Age. Here is the text according to its earliest recension contained in the First Riustring Manuscript (R₁):¹¹

This is the twintegoste londriucht: Sa hwersa Northman an thet lond hlapath, and hia enne mon fath and bindath and ut of londe ledath, and eft withir to londe brangath and hini therto thwingath, thet hi hus barne and wif nedgie and man sle and godishus barne and hwetsa hi to lethe dwa mi, also hi thenne vndfliuch ieftha lesed werth, and withir to londe kumth and to liodon sinon, and hi mugi bikanna brother and swester and londethele and erue and sinera aldera hof and hus, sa fari hi oua sin ein erue uter liodskelde. Sa willath him tha liode thing toseka and sinne opawerpa thruch thet grate morth, ther hi er mith tha witsingon efremid heth. Sa mire thenne afara thene warf gunga and iechta mire tella; enne eth hach hi thenne opa tha heligon to swerande, thet hit al dede bi there nede, also him sin hera bad, ther hi was liues and lethana en vnweldich mon. Sa ne thuruon him tha liode ne frana tohalda seka ni sinna, thruch thet thi frana ne machte him thes fretha waria; thi skalk skolde dwa, also him sin hera bad, thruch thes liues willa. (Buma and Ebel 1963, 54)¹²

The *Twentieth Landlaw* describes the practice of the Vikings to capture Frisian men and force them to fight on their side, and eventually granting them a share of the booty. The Frisian hostage became a prisoner of war, treated like a slave, and consequently obliged to follow the orders of the Viking master, ransacking his own native country against his will as well (Ijssennagger 2010, 44-45; Ijssennagger 2013; 80-81; Giliberto 2017b).¹³

The *Twentieth Landlaw* has a parallel in the *Third Landlaw* (F, E, H₁/H₂, J), which states that if a man is kidnapped by the Northmen and taken abroad, and in the time of his absence his land is acquired by somebody else, he retains the right to reclaim his land if he comes back home:¹⁴

¹⁰ This rule is included in the *Twenty-four Landlaws*, which, alongside the *Seventeen Statutes*, were the earliest and most disseminated Old Frisian legal compilations. The *Landlaws* were written down in Frisian in the first half of the thirteenth century (Bremmer Jr. 2009, 9).

¹¹ The First Riustring Manuscript (R₁: ms. Oldenburg, Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv, Bestand 24-1, Ab. No. 1), also known as *Asegabook* (Book of the Judges), is a heterogeneous anthology of mainly legal documents, regulations and decrees. It includes – together with the already mentioned *Seventeen Statutes* and *Twenty-four Landlaws* – also the *General Register of Compensations*, the *Five Exceptions to the Seventeenth Statute*, as well as a number of regulations specifically concerning the Riustring district. The reference edition used in the present essay is Buma and Ebel 1963.

¹² Trans.: This is the twentieth Landlaw: If the Northmen invade the country and they capture and bind a man, and lead him out of the land, and afterwards bring him back again into the land, and force him to burn houses and to rape women, and to slay men, and to set churches on fire, and whatever disaster he might cause, then, in case he flees, or he is released, and comes back to the country to his people, and if he can recognise his brother and sister and his family estate and landed property, and his parents' house and farm, so should he take possession of his own heritage without compensation to the people. Consequently, if the people want to take legal action against him and accuse him of a crime because of the great murders which he had previously committed with the Vikings, then he can appear in the general assembly, and he may be held responsible. He had to swear an oath by the saints, that he did it all by compulsion, as his lord commanded him, to whom he was not able to oppose his body and life. In such a way neither the people nor the lord may impute [him] criminal acts or faults, because the lord could not secure him legal protection. The servant had to do as his lord commanded, for the sake of his life.

¹³ With some slight textual differences, the *Twentieth Landlaw* is also recorded in the First and Second Hunsingo Manuscripts (H₁ and H₂: mss. Leeuwarden, Tresoar, R 2 and Leeuwarden, Tresoar, R 3; c. 1325-50), the First Emsingo Manuscript (E₁: ms. Groningen, Universiteitsbibliotheek, P.E.I.P. 13; c. 1400), the Fivelgo codex (F: ms. Leeuwarden, Tresoar, R 4), and in the so-called *Jus Municipale Frisonum* (J).

¹⁴ An echo of this rule is also found in the Thirteenth Statute in J and in the Fourteenth Statute in F.

Thet thredde londriucht is: Jef thene mon Nortmon nimat and hi vter lond fleth wert, sa hwasas sin erue then a hwile kapat, sa hi thenne wither inlendis cume, sa fare hi vppa sin ayn (Buma and Ebel 1972, 42-44).¹⁵

All these laws and their variants lay emphasis on the new condition of bondage that applies to a Frisian servant who has been forced by his Scandinavian master to use violence against his own people. On the other hand, it is highly probable that most of the Frisians who joined the Vikings ranks would never return to their land, but would instead start a new life elsewhere.¹⁶

In the light of such considerations, Frisian men captured by the Northern Vikings could be compared to high-ranking servants or legates, that – although deprived of personal freedom – enjoyed special powers and advantages, first of all the privilege (and duty) to fight on the Vikings' side. Accordingly, Scandinavian-Frisian relations were rather ambiguous at that time, and the distinctions between the notions of “prisoner”, “slave”, “servant of high rank”, and “vassal” were probably vague and blurred.

At the base of this custom, as described in the ancient legal sources of Friesland, there are probably anthropological reasons. The multifaceted relationships between Scandinavia and Friesland, which were anything but straightforward, had remarkable effects on the cultural and economic development of Frisian society in the Middle Ages. The peculiar type of Frisian slave discussed here seems to have played a borderline role, which – employing a somewhat oxymoronic expression – might be defined as that of a “privileged slave”.

Nevertheless, there are also evidence suggesting that some Frisians joined the Viking war bands voluntarily (Samplonius 1998, 98; Jesch 2004, 257; IJssennagger 2013, 81-82). Some well-known examples of Frisians “going Viking” – that is taking part in seafaring – and piratical expeditions – are recorded in insular sources. The *Annales Lindisfarnenses*, under the years 855 and 858 (Pertz 1866, 502-07) and the *History of St Cuthbert* (South 2002), as well as Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* (Davidson 1979, 242), for example, all mention a certain Ubbe (or Ubbo) *Dux Fresonum* or Ubbe *Fresicus*. Again, the *Annales Lindisfarnenses* (855) contain an interesting reference to three warriors – Ubbe, Halfdan and Ingvar – mentioned as the chieftains of an army of Danes and Frisians (*Dani et Frisones*). Another case is found in Dudo of St Quentin's *Historia Normannorum* and concerns a Frisian warrior who would have been part of Rollo's war band (Lair 1865, 164-70).

These records confirm the existence of a relationship of alliance and mutual collaboration between Frisian warriors and Scandinavian Vikings.

4. Final Considerations

Seen from a wider perspective, the relations that arose in the Viking Age between Frisians and Scandinavians appear to be multifaceted and at times ambivalent. The sources to draw on for the reconstruction of the ethnic and cultural picture of the North Sea area in the early Middle Ages are quite numerous, and differ from a typological and ideological point of view.

¹⁵ Trans.: The third Landlaw is that if the Northmen capture a man, and he is carried away from the land, and if, in the meantime, someone then purchases his estate, so he [the captured] – if he then returns to his native country – he takes possession of his own inheritance.

¹⁶ About that, it should be remembered that in primitive Germanic societies of medieval times, prisoners of war were often reduced to slavery (Sorokina 2008, 66). On slavery in Middle Ages and on the widespread practice among the Germanic people of enslaving the prisoners of war, see Wergeland 1916, Cameron 2016, and, particularly for medieval Scandinavia, Skyum-Nielsen 1978-79, Karras 1988, and Brink 2008.

The Frankish annals, linked to the Carolingian court, of which they represent the political, religious and military power, emphasise the dramatic aspect of the Viking raids, stressing the ideological conflict between the pagan invaders and the Frankish Christian people.

On the other hand, there are Old Frisian law texts which provide evidence of the Viking practice of capturing and enslaving Frisian men, forcing them to fight on their side, and even sharing spoils with them. Alongside these sources there are historical texts documenting joint raiding between Frisians and Scandinavians. In addition, a number of archaeological finds, including runic inscriptions, contribute to build a quite heterogeneous scenario, in which the opportunities for cooperation and peaceful relations (economic and commercial) seem to prevail over the moments of conflict.

This state of affairs appears to be the outcome of the peculiar and not always straightforward interactions between Frisians and Scandinavians, which are characterised by dynamism and fluidity. The absence of precise boundaries among the peoples of the North Sea regions encouraged the growing of extremely interchangeable cultures, and the development of a context where the reasons of contrast intersect with those of mutual cooperation.

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